



## MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

**Shawn Etcher**  
**Air Safety Investigator**  
**Eastern Region Aviation**

**September 15, 2008**

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Subject: NYC08FA307

Phone Interview with Liam McGukin

Persons on phone call: Mr. Liam McGukin and Shawn Etcher (Self)

Mr. McGukin was a passenger on board the accident balloon he was interviewed over the phone due to the fact that he was not medically able to be interviewed while on scene. The conversation started with me asking Mr. McGukin to explain what he remembers from the time he showed up until after the accident had occurred. Mr. McGukin stated that when they showed up at the meeting parking lot there was a briefing and it was mentioned that there was a fire extinguisher but there was no requirement to actually locate it in the basket. He helped the ground crew hold the balloon open in order for the balloon to inflate using the large fans. As soon as the balloon was inflated they were told for all the "men to jump in first and then the women." He said he also remembered that the accident pilot had released several black "helium party type" balloons and would watch it further than anyone else. He could not remember seeing anyone look over the gas lines but he felt that the pilot was fairly particular and he probably did check them when he wasn't looking. After they started to ascend he was told to grab and pull the black line in that had the basket tied to the back of the trailer that brought it to the launch site. Approximately "20 minutes into the flight" the pilot said that "we are going to land earlier than originally planned," within approximately 5 minutes they were preparing to land. He then stated that "we hit the ground level and the fire started right behind me." When asked his direction of view he said that his back was facing the fuel cylinders and he was looking at his girlfriend standing or kneeling right in front of him. After the first impact and once the fire started he then "jumped out of the basket" in order to try and get away from the fire that was ensuing near the fuel cylinders. He said at some point after getting out of the basket he could hear a male voice yelling "Get out!" I then asked what he was given as a procedure for exiting the basket. He remembers the pilot and even the briefing prior to launch state "that under no circumstances leave the basket until the pilot says it is okay."



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**Air Safety Investigator**  
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Subject: NYC08FA307

Phone Interview with Scottie Owens

Persons on phone call: Ms. Scottie Owens and Shawn Etcher (Self)

Ms. Owens was a passenger on the accident flight. Her position in the basket was next between Mr. McGukin and Mr. Convoy III. I asked her to think back to the time she arrived at the meeting place until after the accident and tell me everything she can remember. She stated when they arrived at the parking lot the owners of the balloon company said they "had a 50/50 chance of going." She remembers seeing everyone assisting to pull the basket out of the trailer while they were doing this she remembers seeing the accident pilot releasing a total of two balloons that were similar to "helium balloons." She watched their pilot watch the balloons with some concern on his face, she remembers wondering "why was he looking at the balloon for so long."

Approximately 20 minutes after being told that they may or may not go, she remembers feeling very rushed to get into the basket for takeoff. The flight seemed uneventful and she remembers seeing the pilot talk on the radio to the ground crew but could not remember hearing what he was saying. When she was told they were landing and to bend her knees during the landing she was surprised by how quick the flight seemed. She then remembers that when the basket touched down the first time the "jolt" was so intense "it knocked me to my knees." She then remembered feeling some intense heat, however Mr. Convoy was "on top of me holding me down," she then remembers hearing someone yell "Get out!" She had difficulty due to the passengers all being piled "on top of each other" and she felt that she was "pinned in the basket."



## MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

**Shawn Etcher**  
**Air Safety Investigator**  
**Eastern Region Aviation**

**September 12, 2008**

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Subject: NYC08FA307

Phone Interview with Nancy Zoeltsch

Persons on phone call: Mrs. Nancy Zoeltsch and Shawn Etcher (Self)

The interview started with me asking Mrs. Zoeltsch to tell me what she can remember about the accident starting back when she first arrived at the meeting point. She stated that when they first arrived they were told "there is a 50/50 chance of going." Her and her son-in-law elected to go to the restroom at that time when they arrived back the owners of the company was in the middle of the safety briefing. She said that they looked surprised that they missed part of the briefing but then explained that there is a fire extinguisher in the basket and to "try and find it when you first get in" and they then asked if anyone had any medical conditions. The owners also said that part of the experience is helping set up the balloon for the flight as they were doing this someone stated to all of the gathered passengers that there are ropes inside to hang on to and "under no circumstances should anyone exit until told to do so by the pilot." While all of this was happening she remembers seeing the accident pilot sending up a couple of helium type balloons and watching the balloon for a lot longer than anyone else was. After the accident pilot released the balloon she remembered thinking that "he was pacing around a lot." After the first of two balloons were set up and departed they were preparing to depart and did so approximately 5 minutes later. When she first got into the basket she remembered thinking that it was very cramped and there was "no room to move around." She said that there was two rows for people to stand one with the pilot which was the front row and the one she was in which was the aft row. Due to the noise of the burner, which was very surprising to her, she was unable to communicate with her family members that were up in the front row. She remembered that the balloon felt "wobbly" on takeoff and she also remembers hearing the accident pilot "yell at the men on the ground." After being enroute the accident pilot said that they were looking for a field to land in and the flight was going to be shorter than anticipated because there was a housing development that they were not sure they would have the ability to go over that area. When they found the field to land in while descending to the field the basket "went through the tops of the pine trees around the field," and she remembers the first landing in the field felt "very hard" after which it bounced along the ground. She further mentioned that she remembered seeing the passenger in her row closest to the fuel cylinders go "flying across the basket," and at that point she knew that "we were on fire." She then found a foot hold used to climb into and out of the basket and used it to get her out even though they had been instructed not to exit until told to do so. After she had got out of the basket she went towards the fire to help her family out of the basket. She saw her son-in-law and one of her daughters but did not see her other daughter, she finally saw her daughter trying to get out of the basket but looked like she was having a lot of difficulty, and she stated that it "was hard to get out of." She grabbed her other daughter and assisted her in getting out and remembered feeling the heat of the fire. As they were running away from the fire she saw the

“chase van” show up, her son-in-law immediately asked them for a fire extinguisher and began trying to fight the fire which was not successful with “such small fire extinguishers.”

AEA-FSDO-17  
RECEIVED

SEP 16 2008

**STATEMENT OF WITNESS**

The purpose of this statement is intended solely for use in determining the facts, conditions and circumstances and the probable cause of the subject accident.

Date: ~~9/17/08~~ 9/7/08 Hour: ~~7:00-7:15~~ 6:15-6:30 PM?1. Place of accident: Field near 1825 Kimberton Rd, West Vincent Township, Pa  
Airport I.D. \_\_\_\_\_2. Type of Aircraft Hot Air Balloon N 844CB

3. Identification/ Registration: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your name: Nancy Zoeltzsch Age: 605. Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Philadelphia, Pa 19149-34456. Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_7. Occupation: Teacher Employer: \_\_\_\_\_8. Where were you at the time of the accident: in hot air balloon

9. Tell in your own words what you saw or heard before and at the time the accident occurred:

Please see attachedContinue on Back ☐Nancy Zoeltzsch  
(Print Name)\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

## RECOLLECTIONS OF BALLOON RIDE AND FIRE – SUNDAY EVENING 9/7/08

When my daughters, Bethany and Kristina with her husband Kevin McShea and I arrived at Ludwig's Village Shopping center we gathered with the other riders of the two balloons riding that night. A gentleman and his daughter from Connecticut who missed their balloon ride either the night before or that morning would ride with us, one in each balloon. Originally my daughter, Kristy, who had made the arrangements for this birthday gift to me, had said that there would be six people in the basket. Since there were four of us, Kristy and her husband, Kevin McShea, my younger daughter, Bethany Zoeltsch and me, we knew that there would be two other people in the same basket. Because of this extra ~~person~~ <sup>person</sup> there were 7 of us plus the pilot in our basket.

At the shopping <sup>center</sup> we were given an introduction and safety talk: asked if anyone had recently had surgery, stay away from the powerful fans used to blow up the balloon, don't leave the basket when it lands until the pilot gives the ok, check for the fire extinguisher in the basket, hold onto the guide ropes in the basket and bend our knees upon landing. The spokesman mentioned that ~~the~~ Air Ventures was not completely satisfied with the winds that evening and that there was a 50% possibility that we would not fly. He said that they were hoping that the winds would be more favorable shortly. We thought that it was a perfect dusk: clear, and with seemingly no winds and were somewhat surprised at the concern. During the spokesman's talk a couple of weather balloons were sent up from the parking lot by one of the employees who I think was our pilot, Earl MacPherson. The group was divided into two groups with 7 in our group and I believe 7 in the other group.

We loaded into the vans and were driven to the field south of the shopping center. The other group seemed to start to prepare their balloon immediately while our pilot seemed hesitant and was still sending up weather balloons. Finally they started to set up the balloon, a beautiful multicolored balloon with a huge butterfly on it. Some of us helped with the set-up of the balloon following the instructions of the employees of Air Ventures.

Finally everything was ready. The three men and pilot entered first and then we four women. It was more difficult to enter than I anticipated. I had to use footholds to climb over the basket. It was so crowded that I needed help getting my leg in the basket. I was surprised at the difficulty getting the balloon upright for flight. It seemed to me that we rocked and rolled considerably. The pilot was hollering instructions to the linemen and at one point they had to add another rope to one of the lines.

Finally we were aloft. I was surprised at our proximity to the propane heaters and the heat that I felt on my back every time the pilot fired up the propane gas up the balloon. It was also very noisy. I had called my husband who was in the vicinity on the ground with our two grandchildren, Kristy and Kevin's children, and we often had to cease talking because of the noise from the propane fire torches. We were packed so tight in the balloon that movement was difficult and I couldn't easily turn around. Since I had a corner spot I did have a good view of our trip.

The ride was smooth and the people on the ground were waving and calling up to us. The pilot pointed out geographical locations and answered our questions. After about ½ hour the pilot said that we needed to land soon because we were getting too close to tract housing and that it would be difficult to find a suitable landing area with access for the van that was following us. I had been told that the ride would be an hour long and I was surprised that we were landing so soon. Eventually we saw a field that was suitable and we started our descent. It felt like we were going very quickly, faster than I had expected. We passed through some tree tops and I remember Bethany being hit by the tops of the branches and then we started to land.

I grabbed the guide rope in the basket as we had been told to do and bent my knees to cushion the landing. We landed hard and I remembering rocking back and forth and to and fro banging against the basket, I heard the sound of the propane fire and wondered why the pilot was still firing the balloon when we were trying to land. The sound seemed to be consistent and not intermittent like when we were flying. Suddenly I saw Liam McGuckin fly over my head onto the field outside the basket. Since the instructions were so clear that we weren't to leave the basket until the pilot told us so in order to prevent the destabilization of the basket I wondered what he was doing. He rolled on the grass and then jumped up screaming to call 911. I turned behind me and saw that there was fire in the air behind me. I scrambled over the basket and realized that we were still moving. I decided to jump anyway but on the way down the outside of the basket I grabbed the foothold with the hopes of helping to stabilize the basket since three of my family members were still inside. I don't remember exactly the sequence of people leaving the basket but I believe that John and Bethany followed me. John was severely burned but was able to walk. When I looked around I saw that Scotty Owens was already out. Later I saw Kevin pacing around the side of the basket looking very frustrated wanting to do something. I then realized that my daughter Kristy was not out yet. I ran towards the basket which was stationary now and saw her come up and then fall back in the basket. By the time that I arrived at the basket she was climbing out and I grabbed her arm and helped to pull her out shouting that we had to get out of there.

Shortly after Kristy got out the basket was in flames. She was shouting to Kevin to get out of the way for fear that the whole balloon would blow up. Everyone was screaming to call 911 and trying to find out our location since we had no idea where we were. While the rest ran to the nearby house I stayed watching Kevin and saw the balloon van pull up. Kevin ran over shouting for fire extinguishers. The men (2?) ran out horrified and pulled out the extinguishers (2 I think). I saw Kevin using the extinguishers but by this time the whole basket was in flames and the extinguishers were useless against that inferno.

Finally I followed the others to the house. I remember seeing Liam on his cell phone and Scotty was crying on the grass outside. Inside the house Bethany, who is a nurse at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, was tending to John's wounds and the family members were wetting cloths for us to put on our burns. John asked to lie down and they helped him to lie on the floor of a room next to the kitchen. I sat beside him because his arms were shaking and I was afraid that he was going into shock. He was conscious and able to talk to me.

Finally the emergency vehicles arrived and we were sent to various hospitals. My worst burns are on the right side of my back and arm. I was on the corner of the basket with John behind me, then Scotty and then Liam who I suppose was next to the propane tanks.

Across the horizontal barrier that divided the two halves of the rectangular basket was Bethany directly across from me, then Kevin, Kristy and the pilot. Kristy, who did not suffer any burns, said that the pilot was leaning on top of her preventing her from getting out but also keeping her from getting burned. She said that he was shouting to her to get out and she was shouting back at him that she couldn't move because he was on top of her. Finally she either managed to get out from under him or he moved so that she could get out.

Nancy Zoeltsch

Philadelphia, Pa. 19149-3445

home  
cell